

**The Report Committee for Stacey Jackson
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African-Centered Psychology within Black Studies:

**A Call for the centrality of African-Centered Psychology within the field of
Black Studies**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Kevin O. Cokley

Keisha Bentley-Edwards

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Studies

By

Stacey Jackson, B.S.; M.S.

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Stacey Jackson, M.A

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SUPERVISOR: Kevin O. Cokley

ABSTRACT

In an effort to accentuate the need for Black Psychological theory, research and methodology within the field of Africology, Africana professor Dr. DeReef Jamison argues that in order to gain a full understanding of the African American experience, Africana scholars must consider the importance of Black Psychology as it relates to their work. In his article entitled, *Through the Prism of Black Psychology: A Critical review of Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Africology as seen through the Paradigmatic Lens of Black Psychology* he notes that while Black Psychology is identified as a core component of Black Studies, few programs include such courses within their curricula. He further suggests that the goal within Black Psychology of examining the impact of African Americans historical experiences on their psyche speaks to the primary goal of Black Studies. Thus the empirical nature of Black Psychology utilized to understand the African American psychological experience can have tremendous implications for the field of Black studies. Through an overview of the field of Black Studies, its core curriculum, select graduate programs, and the field of Black Psychology, this paper will extend Dr. Jamison's arguments by suggesting that African-Centered psychology specifically, needs to be central in the field of Black studies. While Black Psychology empirically addresses the African American psyche considering African-American historical experiences, it is the African Worldview analytical approach, which is central to African-Centered psychological theory and methodology and provides a culturally specific analysis, which is critical to the Black Studies intellectual pursuit.

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INTRODUCTION

The multi-disciplinary field of Black studies consists of a profound connection to the social and political periods of Black history within America. While this field is academic in scope, it is rooted in the activist and social justice ideals of African Americans living within Western society. Dr. Maulana Karenga, one of the key scholars within the field of Black studies, describes the origins of the discipline as being “rooted in the social visions and struggles of the 60’s which aimed at Black power, liberation and a higher level of human life and thus from its inception, it has had both an academic and social thrust and mission” (Karenga, 1993, p.3). Similarly, Tillotson and McDougal (2013) recognize the development of Black studies as an opposition to hegemony and an effort for Black Americans to articulate the meaning of the Black experience and condition within Western society. Many African American scholars within the field took advantage of this period of injustice and utilized the academy as a political platform for racial uplift through education. As such, there was a demand for an academic field of study relevant to the needs and aspirations of the Black community and a desire for students to engage in “self-defining, liberating educational experiences” (Reid-Merritt, 2009, p.78). In his Introduction to Black Studies text, Karenga (1993) defines the discipline as “the systematic and critical study of the multidimensional aspects of Black thought and practice in their current and historical unfolding” (p. 21). His text details this multi-faceted field by providing an in-depth look at the development of Black studies as a result of key events in Black History, liberation movements, Black historical figures, and various social, political, economic, religious, and mental aspects of Black life. He identified the academic and social concerns which are at the core of Black studies to be the result of the push for a discipline relevant to Black students,

capable of educating Black students and producing Blacks capable of addressing concerns relevant to the Black community at large (Karenga, 1993).

With the rapid growth of Black studies in various academic institutions across the country, a professional organization was formed. The National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) was developed in 1975 by African American intellectuals who wished to “structure, clarify, and define the curricular dimensions of our discipline” (*National Council of Black Studies*, 2013). In an effort to organize and manage the discipline, the NCBS states:

“The mission of the field of Black/Africana Studies (also called African American Studies, Afro-American Studies, Pan-African Studies, Black American Studies, African Diaspora Studies) is to advance and transmit broad knowledge of the histories, cultures, and linkages among peoples of Africa and their descendants in the New World, and to provide intellectual tools to analyze, understand, and address the significant social, political, economic and humanist problems they face” (*National Council of Black Studies*, 2013).

A simple review of the mission statement reveals the multiple names utilized interchangeably which is a notable criticism of the field of Black Studies. Black studies scholar Patricia Reid-Merritt recognizes the problematic nature of multiple titles stating, “properly naming the field with a single, unifying designation has remained an elusive goal” (Reid-Merritt, 2009, p.77). She further suggests that the varying titles can be attributed to the multi-disciplinary nature of the field contributing to the “ongoing development of new programs and academic units with specialized foci and creative titles to match” (Reid-Merritt, 2009, p.77). Similarly, Dr. Karenga attributes the issue of naming the discipline to a larger question of self-definition arguing that the demand from students for such a discipline resulted in significantly “varied administrative

strategies and intellectual strands” (Karenga, 2009, p.44) implemented to create such a presence within the academy. Carroll (2010), Karenga (2009), Reid-Merritt (2009) and others suggest that the name Black Studies reflects the historical struggle for freedom and liberation associated with the discipline; while, names such as Afro-American studies, Africana Studies and African Diaspora studies reflect the cultural focus within the field. In 1998 California State University at Long Beach, the institutional home of Black studies scholar Maulana Karenga changed the name of their Black Studies program to Africana Studies to reflect the nature of the program course material. The then department chair Alosi J. Moloji stated that the title change places “the curriculum in a geographical and cultural context that more accurately defines the program's intended focus and teachings which extends beyond the study of African-Americans and continental Africans” (Miyagawa, 2007, para, 2). Regardless of the multitude of names and diverse subject matter Patricia Reid-Merritt (2009) recognizes the unifying academic purpose of the field as being the study and analysis of people of African descent from multiple approaches and perspectives reflective of an African worldview as central to the discipline. Along with a unifying academic purpose, Karenga proposes that amidst the variation in names exist seven basic subject areas prominent to the discipline. He suggests that “the seven basic subject areas of Black studies are: Black History; Black Religion; Black Social Organization; Black Politics; Black Economics; Black Creative Production (Black arts, Music and Literature) and Black Psychology (Karenga, 1993, p. 26). For the purpose of this paper, the multiple names will be used interchangeably to reflect the unifying academic goal and basic subject areas within the field.

African American studies scholar and professor DeReef Jamison has examined the field, its disciplinary goals and curricular focus and recognized the lack of Black Psychology within

the field. He argues that “if the discipline of Africology is attempting to fully understand Africana experiences, Africology must reexamine the importance of psychology and its role in aiding Africana scholars to interpret and understand the experiences of people of African descent in the Americas and throughout the Diaspora” (Jamison, 2008, p.96). Ultimately, Jamison posits that Black Psychological theory, research and methodology are applicable and relevant to the future of Africana studies and Africana life. The following manuscript will maintain his assessment of the invisibility of Black Psychology within the field, and extend his argument with a call for the inclusion of African-Centered Psychology as central within the field of Black Studies.

CORE CURRICULUM AND SELECT GRADUATE PROGRAMS OF STUDY

In an effort to address systematic and structural challenges within the discipline and establish a sense of collectivity within the field, the NCBS developed a model core curriculum offering “a well-demarcated yet flexible common framework for the task of integrating several disciplinary perspectives to examine the historical and contemporary experiences, conditions, and aspirations of African-descendant peoples” (*National Council of Black Studies*, 2013). Table 1 displays the core curriculum structure developed by the National Council of Black Studies, which was created as a guide for Black studies programs to utilize in the construction of their academic curriculum.

Table 1: Core Curriculum Structure

Introductory	Foundation Courses (3-6 Credits) <i>Introduction to the Discipline, Topical Survey Introduction, Historical Introduction</i>		
	Topical/Thematic Tracks (15-18 credits)		
	<i>Cultural Production & Expression</i>	<i>Historical Investigation</i>	<i>Social & Structural Analysis</i>
Intermediate	Literature and writing, music/dance, visual and performing arts, film, languages, linguistic studies, technology, video, mass media, contemporary culture, religion and spiritual practices	African, Diasporian, African-American, Caribbean, global, regional, special topics, history surveys	Social thought, social institutions, political economy, gender and sexuality, identity and self-definition, social movement and liberation studies, social and public policy and community development, global issues and perspectives.
Advanced			
Upper (Senior/Graduate)	Capstone Courses and Activities (3-6) credits		
	Theoretical and Methodological Studies		
	Seminars, Senior Theses, advanced studies, fieldwork, travel, internships, research projects and activities.		

(NCBS Curriculum Committee, 2010)

The core curriculum model posed by the NCBS allows for flexibility within Black studies programs worldwide given its content and thematic structure. While Black studies programs follow this general model, the courses within such programs may vary based on the variety of courses taught under the suggested thematic tracks within the discipline. In an effort to gain a better understanding of the structure of Black Studies (and related) graduate programs, I have selected five graduate programs as listed on the NCBS website to examine the particular courses which make up their core curriculum. Listed on the website are a total of 25 graduate programs in Black Studies (or related); 9 of which are Doctoral degree programs and 16 of which are Masters Degree programs. The University of California-Berkeley and Temple University are both Doctoral graduate programs and recognized as the first degree programs of their kinds, while Columbia University, Georgia State University and The University of Texas at Austin are Masters Degree programs which I chose in an effort to achieve geographical diversity among the programs.

The University of California-Berkeley

Beginnings in 1970, the department of African American studies at the University of California-Berkeley, trains students to develop a theory pertaining to the African Diaspora and racialized blackness across history, social institutions, culture and geographical location (*University of California-Berkeley African American Studies*, 2012). With strengths in African American and sub-Saharan African history, cultural studies, women's, gender and sexuality studies, education, sociology, and African languages (*University of California-Berkeley African American Studies*, 2012), students in the PhD program are expected to apply a multidisciplinary approach to their study of persons of African descent. UC-Berkeley African Diaspora Studies doctoral students are strongly encouraged to select a designated emphasis for specialized

certification in faculty areas of expertise such as: Women and Gender Studies, Critical Theory, Film & Media, and New Media (*University of California-Berkeley African American Studies*, 2012). The current list of graduate study courses consist of theory based courses, research methods courses, Black feminism, identity, politics, cultural studies, and education based courses.

Temple University

The African American Studies program at Temple University provides an intellectual environment in which students conduct critical examination, analyses and interpretations of the experiences, traditions and dynamics of people of African descent (*Temple University*, 2013). Grounded in an African-Centered philosophy, the faculty and staff of the department believe that a knowledge and understanding of the cultural and historical experiences is required for the analysis and interpretation of people of African descent. Doctoral students are required to fulfill a minimum of 63 credit hours along with the successful completion of a written comprehensive exam and defense of a dissertation (*Temple University*, 2013). Core curriculum courses in the African American studies PhD program at Temple University (2013) consist of courses in research methods, Afrocentric theory and methods, African aesthetics, ethnography and African American literature. Lastly, graduate students are eligible for a unique academic opportunity in which they will be able to investigate aspects of West African civilization through academic study and cultural experiences studying abroad in Ghana, West Africa (*Temple University*, 2013).

Columbia University

Founded in July 1993 by Dr. Manning Marable, The Institute for Research in African-American Studies of Columbia University is an academic resource center that offers

undergraduate and Masters degree programs in African American studies (*Columbia University African American studies*, 2013). Graduate students engage in critical analyses regarding a wealth of literature and research on African American studies pertaining to the African American lived experience. Students are also expected to demonstrate how such experiences have contributed to, and been shaped by, political, cultural and economic forces both nationally and globally (*Columbia University African American studies*, 2013). Graduate students are required to complete a Masters thesis and take African American studies pro-seminar, Thesis writing workshop and one of the following: Critical approaches to African American studies, or Philosophical perspectives on race and racism, or Racial Disparities: Causes & Consequences. Graduate students are also required to identify graduate courses that define their topic of concentration as an expression of their intellectual interests (*Columbia University African American studies*, 2013). Lastly, graduate students are required to take at least two courses in history, one in humanities and one in social sciences (*Columbia University African American studies*, 2013).

Georgia State University

The African American Studies graduate program at Georgia State University (GSU) examines Africa and people of African descent through a variety of techniques from a variety of disciplines such as the humanities and social sciences. The Department of African American Studies places emphasis on critical thinking, community engagement and social justice in the exploration of race/ethnicity, culture, gender and the social defining experiences of Africans and people of African descent (*Georgia State University African American Studies*, 2013). What makes GSU's Masters of Arts degree program in African American studies unique is that it offers two areas of concentration: (1) Community Empowerment and (2) Culture and Aesthetics.

“With a focus on historical and contemporary empowerment strategies, the Community Empowerment concentration exposes the student to the political, economic, and policy responses to the impediments of African/African-American community development. The Culture and Aesthetics concentration focuses on understanding and interpreting the philosophical, literary, and artistic contributions of people of African descent. Along with courses in a designated area of concentration” (*Georgia State University African American Studies*, 2013).

GSU graduate students are required to take core courses in Proseminar in African-American Studies, Theories in African-American Studies, Black Feminist Thought, and Research Methods in African-American Studies, electives in approved courses and complete a Masters Thesis (*Georgia State University African American Studies*, 2013).

The University of Texas at Austin

The Masters of Arts in African and African Diaspora studies graduate program at The University of Texas at Austin is designed to provide students with the skills and analytical frameworks necessary to engage in interdisciplinary approaches for the examination of the lives of people of African descent throughout Africa and the African Diaspora (*The University of Texas at Austin*, 2013). Graduate students examine the lives of people of African descent through engaging in key works in such concentrations as: Black Feminism, Black History, Black Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, Critical Educational Studies, Performance Studies, Political Economy, and Political Philosophy. The program has at its core an objective of providing student with the knowledge to pursue an academic career or conduct scholarly research in African and African Diaspora Studies. Students are required to take courses in African Diaspora studies,

theories, methods, approved electives and complete a masters report requirement (*The University of Texas at Austin African and African Diaspora studies*, 2013).

Of the seven basic subject areas of Black Studies noted by Karenga (1993), none of the five graduate degree programs briefly reviewed in this document explicitly list Black psychology as a requirement of their program within their curriculum. While some of these programs offer graduate course elective opportunities which may allow graduate students to gain exposure to the theory and practice of Black Psychology, none of the programs identified Black Psychology as central to their Black studies curriculum. As we are reminded of the flexible thematic core curriculum set by the NCBS, and consider the graduate program curricula briefly described, one is left with the question as to why Dr. Karenga identified Black Psychology as a key subject area of Black Studies.

THE THREE SCHOOLS OF BLACK PSYCHOLOGY

The field of psychology in its most simplistic sense is the study of human behavior and the human mind. Within the trajectory of the field of psychology there exists a history of an interest in the psychological differences between Black and White people. In his text entitled, *Even the Rat was White*, African American psychologist Robert Guthrie (2004) details the empirical studies conducted by modern day psychologists examining human characteristics in an effort to identify race related psychological differences between Blacks and Whites within Western society. He states that such research “not only provided inaccurate data that led to racist conclusions, but also called into question the intentions of psychological researchers” (p.51). Comparable to the field of Black studies, African Americans within the field of psychology recognized the problematic nature of psychological research specifically pertaining to the study and assessment of African Americans. African American psychologists were concerned with the European centered influence in traditional psychology, its impact on the study of African Americans and the reported findings of such research. African-centered psychologist Kobi Kambon describes the inception of Black psychology as an alternative discipline to assess and address the psychological issues pertaining to the African American population (Kambon, 1998). This alternative discipline grew in popularity within the field of psychology as African Americans began to discover and embrace a sense of racial empowerment. This sense of empowerment was gained through the establishment of independence from European organizations and structures dominating the field of psychology. Black psychology as a discipline allowed for the empowerment of African Americans within the field of psychology through its ability to evaluate the Black psyche from an African American perspective.

Well known Black Studies scholar Maulana Karenga (1993) was one of the first Black Studies intellectuals to embrace and argue for the inclusion of Black Psychology in Black studies programs (Kambon, 1998) and dedicates a chapter to the discipline in his *Introduction to Black Studies* text. Among his discussion of Black psychology he identifies the traditional school, the reformist school and the radical school as the three schools of thought pertaining to Black Psychology. Each school is a reflection of the changes in approach taken by Black psychologists in their efforts to examine and assess the African American population. Table 2 describes the three schools of thought in detail.

Table 2: The Three Schools of Thought of Black Psychology

	Definition	Major Theorists/ Psychologists
Traditional School	- This school of thought is a reaction to Eurocentric psychology while still utilizing European centered psychological theory and methodology. While it asserts to change white attitudes it does so without offering alternatives for correcting problems.	- Kenneth Clark, Mamie Phipps-Clark, William Grier and Price Cobbs
Reformist School	- This school of thought places emphasis on confronting public policies that maintain and support institutional racism. While it advocates for a Black Psychology perspective it also combines it with traditional Eurocentric psychological methodology.	- Charles Thomas, Joseph White, William Cross
Radical School	- This school of thought places emphasis on an African worldview analysis as essential to understanding the psychology of people of African descent. An authentic psychological theory and analysis rooted in African culture is utilized in the study of African Americans.	- Bobby Wright, Amos Wilson, and Kobi Kambon

(Karenga, 1993)

Black psychologists who subscribe to the Traditional school of thought recognize the need for a change in the attitudes pertaining to the psychological assessment of African Americans however still utilize Eurocentric methodology. Black psychologists who subscribe to the reformist school seek to implement change through the combination of Black psychology and

traditional Eurocentric methods of analysis. Lastly, Radical Black Psychologists emphasize an approach to the assessment of African Americans rooted in Afrocentric psychological methodology. These three schools of Black psychological thought are a reflection of the variation of thought and approach to the analysis and assessment of African Americans and people of African descent among Black psychologists. While Jamison (2008) argues for the inclusion of Black psychology as a whole in the field of Black studies, I extend his argument by suggesting that the Radical school of Black Psychology in particular should be central in the examination and analysis of people of African descent in the field of Black studies.

African/Black psychologists argue that such varying schools of thought are the result of Eurocentric misconceptions being brought unconsciously by Black Psychologists to the field (Carroll, 2010; Kambon, 1998; Karenga, 1993; Jackson, 1982). While each school of thought varies, it is the Radical school of thought that is African centered and rooted in an African worldview.

AFRICAN CENTERED PSYCHOLOGY AND THE WORLDVIEWS PARADIGM

Central to the Radical school of Black Psychology, commonly referred to as African Centered psychology, is the conceptual framework of Worldview and the application of an Afrocentric worldview in the assessment of the African American population. Sue (1978) defined worldview as “the way in which people perceive their relationship to the world determined by cultural upbringing and life experiences” (p.458). Similarly, Kambon identifies the worldview system as representing a philosophical infrastructure of cultural beliefs and behaviors pertaining to particular populations (Kambon, 1998). He argues that people operate according to a cultural reality specific to the cultural group to which they identify. As we consider the research suggesting psychological differences between Blacks and Whites, the worldview paradigm offers a cultural explanation for racial differences. In addition to providing potential explanations for racial differences, the concept of worldview also suggests the importance of cultural factors in the assessment and understanding of the human population. Kambon (1998) employs the concept of “Cultural Survival Thrust” to describe “the meaning and role of humans’ collective adaptations to their environment and how that ongoing cumulative process actually defines their distinct collective histories and culture-philosophy of life” (p.74). Therefore, a particular group’s “Cultural Survival Thrust” refers to their respective worldviews. The Worldviews Paradigm proposes that the African American and European American worldviews represent distinctly different cultural realities or worldview orientations that can be distinguished along the philosophical structures of Cosmology, Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology (Kambon, 1998). The first component, Cosmology refers to the reality structured experience of a particular racial-cultural group. Ontology is the second component and refers to

the basis of reality as determined by a particular racial-cultural group. The third component, Epistemology refers to the way in which a particular racial-cultural group develops an understanding for their reality. Lastly, Axiology refers to the value a particular racial-culture group ascribes to human-nature relations. Thus these four critical components “articulate the philosophical structure of the worldview construct and the manner in which it defines cultural reality indigenous to the racial-cultural group which it defines (Kambon, 1998, p. 75). What distinguishes African-Centered psychology from the remaining schools of thought of Black psychology is that African- Centered psychology acknowledges this conceptual framework and incorporates an approach representative of African cultural values and beliefs in the assessment of African Americans.

The worldview paradigm identifies the distinct worldviews of individuals of European descent and individuals of African descent as being Eurocentric and Afrocentric respectively. As we consider the growing popularity of African-Centered psychology in comparison to traditional psychology in the assessment of African Americans, African-Centered psychology’s success can be attributed to its utilization of an Afrocentric worldview as opposed to the Eurocentric worldview employed by traditional psychology. According to Molefi Asante (1991), “Afrocentricity is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person” (p.171). Similarly Kershaw (1992) defines Afrocentricity as being centralized in the experiences of people of African descent, placing emphasis on an analysis rooted in the history and realities of Black people. In his argument of the importance of Afrocentricity within African Centered psychology, Kambon (1998) details the differences between a European worldview and an African worldview.

Table 2. Comparative worldviews schematic

EUROPEAN/EUROPEAN-AMERICAN WORLDVIEW		AFRICAN/AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORLDVIEW
ETHOS		
Control/Mastery over Nature		Oneness/Harmony with Nature
Survival of the Fittest		Survival of the Group
VALUES AND CUSTOMS		
Exclusiveness/Dichotomy		Inclusiveness/Synthesis
Competition-Individual Rights		Cooperation-Collective Responsibility
Separateness-independence		Corporateness and Interdependence
Materialism-Ordinality		Spiritualism-Circularity
Intervention-Oppression and Aggression		Complimentarity-Understanding
PSYCHO-BEHAVIORAL MODALITY		
Individualism		Groupness
Uniqueness-Differences		Sameness-Commonality
European/White Supremacy (Racism/Anti-African)		Humanism-Religious

(Kambon, 1998, p.130)

As can be seen in the Comparative Worldviews Schematic detailed in Table 2 by Kambon (1998), the European Worldview and African Worldview consist of specific ethos, values and customs, and psycho-behavioral modalities which are significantly different, racially pluralistic and inevitably at odds with each other. Kambon defines the European worldview as the conceptual ideological framework derived from European history and cultural reality representative of a European survival thrust; contrary to an African worldview which is the conceptual ideological framework derived from African history and cultural reality representative of an African survival thrust (Kambon, 1998). Thus, Eurocentricity is central to a European worldview and Afrocentricity is central to an African worldview. Mazama (2001) argues that “Afrocentricity contends that our main problem as African people is our usually unconscious adoption of the Western worldview and perspective and their attendant conceptual frameworks” (p.387). As we recall the challenges within the field of Black studies and the

European based approach, there exists a need for the use of an Afrocentric worldview in the study of people of African descent. An Afrocentric approach provides a more culturally inclusive assessment and analysis of this population in comparison to approaches centered in European culture. Ultimately, within an academic discipline such as Black Studies, which asserts to study people of African descent, the use of an Afrocentric worldview is required to provide a culturally accurate assessment of African descendent peoples.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPPRESSION

The Worldviews Paradigm proposes that African Americans and European Americans operate according to their distinct cultural worldview, and that this orientation is natural and normal for their cultural group. Cultural Misorientation (CM) is proposed as one of the major psychological issues affecting African Americans that African-Centered psychology and psychological research must address (Kambon, 1992). The psychological construct of *Cultural Misorientation* (CM) was developed by Kambon to describe the psychology of African Americans who display behaviors and attitudes that are associated more with the values, beliefs and norms of European American culture as opposed to African American culture (Kambon, 2003). Therefore, CM is a psychological condition of basic incorrect cultural orientation seen among African Americans reflecting a false African American sense of self. Kambon (1993) asserts that “the average African in America operates/functions in a mentally disordered state, on a daily basis, engendered by White supremacy domination over our African cultural reality here in America” (p. 14). Therefore, Kambon suggests that CM is a common personality disorder among African Americans due to the domination of the European American culture over the African American culture pertaining to the psychology of African Americans. According to Kambon (2003), “Eurocentric institutions comprising African society socializes, indoctrinates, and literally brainwashes or misorients Black people so effectively that the cultural oppression process almost totally disconnects Blacks from their African cultural reality at the conscious level of experience” (p.42-43). Therefore, this European American cultural reality system that is imposed upon African Americans is disordered in that it encourages African Americans to reject their natural cultural reality system and adapt to the European Worldview orientation. This is

done through acting against their basic cultural instincts in terms of education, economics, politics, religion, mental health and various other vital areas of life (Carroll, 2008; Kambon, 2003; Kambon 1998; Kambon, 1992). Thus, Kambon's model of African American cultural oppression proposes that African Americans who have developed a strong identification with the European American Worldview experience CM (Kambon, 2003). CM, however, goes unrecognized, according to Kambon (2003), by the traditional Western psychological systems which dominate our conceptions of mental health and illness (such as the American Psychiatric Association, 1994) due to their inherent Eurocentric foundation employed to define functioning behavior and mental health. This lack of recognition results in the lack of assessment of this disorder by European American mental health researchers. Ultimately, African Centered psychologists who employ radical Black psychological methodology rooted in an African worldview are the only psychologists knowledgeable to assess this disorder and offer methods of intervention and treatment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD OF BLACK STUDIES

There is a need for scholars within Black studies to implement systematic changes regarding its approach to the study of people of African descent. There are a number of scholars within academia who advocate for changes within the field in an effort to address and eliminate some of the aforementioned challenges such as the naming of the discipline. While many of the challenges are in relation to structural and administrative concerns within the field, there is a growing consensus among scholars interested in the study of people of African descent for a change in the methodological approach contributing to the field. In his call for African centered social sciences for human liberation, Black Psychologist Na'im Akbar acknowledges the problematic nature of the acceptance and utilization of Western science within the social sciences. He believes that rooted in the domination and oppression of African Americans is a Westernized approach to the examination of this population. He argues that "African social scientists have failed to come to grips with the fact that the tools that they have acquired in the course of their training in the Western social science tradition have ill equipped them to deal with the fundamental task of liberating African people – socially, politically, economically, and psychologically" (Akbar, 1984, p. 395). Ama Mazama (2001) also acknowledges the Western influence on the field of Black Studies by making claims that the curriculum is nothing more than a European study of Africa. As we consider the various challenges within the field of Black studies and the heavy European influence on the disciplines' approach to the study of people of African descent, there appears to be a call for a change within the field. Research on African American racial identity suggests that an individual's identification with their racial-ethnic group indicates that they utilize the cultural values, norms, and behavioral standards of that group in

their psychological and behavioral orientation in life (Cross, 1971, 1991; Kambon, 1992; White & Parham, 1990). The implications of African Centered psychology within the field of Black studies are clear; the empirical study of people of African descent based on an African worldview offers a cultural definition of the Black experience based on African cultural specific analysis. Jamison (2008) suggests that Black psychology demonstrates the importance of presenting evidence based work which is central to the field of psychology. He suggests that “by exploring the various ways that Black psychologists have examined experiences, Black psychology reflects the diversity and complexity of thought in Africology” (p.110). While I believe each school of thought is relevant within Black Studies, I argue that the Radical school offers a unique perspective through its African centered focus eliminating the use of Eurocentric paradigms.

CONCLUSION

Jackson (1982) suggests that “one component of Black studies, that is not only relevant to the general debate over the efficacy of the field but that may serve also as an example of the academic worth of the subject, is the discipline of Black Psychology” (p.241). As we are reminded of the history of the formation of the field of Black Studies and the ongoing quest to establish agency and relevance within the academy at large, Jackson (1982) argues that the cultural roots, spiritual dimensions, and universality unique to Black Psychology should be utilized by Black Studies scholars. Black Studies intellectuals argue for the inclusion of Black Psychology as being central to Black Studies curriculum amidst the National Council of Black Studies notable exclusion of the subject area in its core curriculum. As we recall Kambon’s (1998) psychology of oppression and the oppressive nature of European methods of assessing African American people, the need to analyze this population from a culturally relevant methodology becomes apparent not just in psychological analysis, but all works professing to detail the Black experience. African Centered psychology has been influential in the advancement of scholarly theory and research for the advancement of people of African descent (Carroll, 2010; Guthrie, 2004; Kambon 1998, Karenga, 1993). Although there are many advocates for the inclusion of African Centered Psychology within the field of Black Studies, barriers exist preventing its centrality within the field of Black studies.

Having completed a Masters of Science degree in an African Centered Psychology program and a Masters of Arts degree in an African and African Diaspora studies program, I have recognized two distinct differences between the discipline of psychology and Black studies which may create such barriers. Traditionally, the field of psychology has focused largely on

individual mental health concerns while the field of Black studies focuses on collective institutional and systematic factors contributing to oppression. The incorporation of a discipline which evolved from an individualistic nature may be problematic and contradictory to the collectivistic nature of Black Studies. Black Psychologists and other scholars argue that the standardized concepts and techniques utilized as tools to understand human functioning are the single most powerful tool of oppression (Guthrie, 2004; Kambon, 1998; Nobles, 1980). Given the goal of Black Studies as highlighting the oppressive nature of society, and the ultimate oppressive nature of traditional psychological theory and practice, one can understand the failure to include such a discipline evolving from such practice. However, what makes the inclusion of Black psychology, particularly African Centered Psychology, significantly different is that it is rooted in an African worldview which is collective in nature, grounded in African cultural practice, aimed at the examination of the Black psyche. Thus, African Centered Psychology utilizes theory and methodology grounded in an African worldview to highlight the oppressive nature of traditional psychology; a goal parallel to that of Black Studies.

My training in psychology has always led me to seek out research and literary works grounded in an empirically based quantitative research; however, as I matriculated through my Masters of Arts African and African Diaspora studies degree program I often found myself having to grapple with the idea of engaging with theoretical claims with no empirical quantitative support. As Jamison (2008) notably stated:

“Black psychology demonstrates the importance of being evidence-based in one’s work.

In many Africology departments, some students are learning that others should accept

their arguments simply because they make sense or worse because they speak with

passion. Perhaps, the empirical component of Black psychology can serve as an example

of the importance of presenting evidence, even when what you say makes sense without it” (p.110).

My experiences have led me to not only agree with Jamison’s statement, but to further it by suggesting that Black psychology is the tool which allows for the application of Black Studies theory. He is ultimately suggesting that findings from evidence-based empirical Black Psychological research will provide support for the theoretically based claims pertaining to the Black experience that Black studies scholars wish to articulate. African Centered psychology allows for a multitude of research studies to be conducted pertaining to various aspects of African American life and results provide implications for future research, and ultimately implications for the uplift and progression of people of African descent. While I am not arguing that the methodological approach of Black Psychology is superior to that of Black studies, I am arguing that the latter informs the former and can be used collectively to implement social change. Ultimately, I believe differing views regarding methodological approach largely contribute to the invincibility of Black Psychology from Black Studies curriculum.

Acknowledged for his dedication and efforts in forming the first Black Studies program in the United States and as the father of Black Studies, Nathan Hare (1972) recognized the profound impact the discipline of Black Studies can have on society as a whole. He makes a call to Black students stating:

“Now is the time for all black intelligentsia, to rally around a prolonged struggle to rid the world of racism, achieve black self-determination, prepare themselves to become leaders, and sharpen their tools and their understanding of the plight of the black race and the world” (Hare, 1972, p.47).

Recognizing the revolutionary nature of the field of Black Studies, Hare (1972) makes a call to Black students to pursue the field, and use the knowledge they gain to change the world. While the field of Black Studies in its current state provides the knowledge and theoretical foundation required to inform a revolution, I strongly believe that the Afrocentric principle and practice of African Centered Black psychology will provide the tools and support to implement an intervention to the systematic oppression of people of African descent. Establishing African Centered Black Psychology as a central component within Black Studies will strengthen the scholarly work of both disciplines through the production of theoretically based empirically validated literary works. This will allow for the dissemination of intellectually based works regarding the oppression and injustice of people of African descent to a wide range of disciplines, reaching people from a wide range of academic backgrounds. If social justice and social change are central to the mission of the field of Black Studies, a change must first take place from within before changes can be seen on a global scale. I believe that the inclusion of African Centered Black Psychology within the field of Black Studies, is the exact change that could transcend the discipline from being a voice for social justice to the leaders in taking action towards the racial and social uplift of people of African descent.

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